



Chapter One

His Imperial Majesty, King Zarek, requests your presence as his esteemed guest.

The gold powder dusting the black scroll sticks to my clammy fingers like a layer of fine desert sand. The paper is thick and smooth to the touch, the lettering within inlaid with what looks like real gold and infused with some mysterious, honeyed fragrance. I rub the parchment between my thumb and forefinger, delighting in the distinctive quality of the stock.

Sands, but it's gorgeous.

I glance around my cramped forge, half expecting to see a royal messenger standing at attention, but the elegant invitation from the Imperial House had had no escort. It'd been sitting on my anvil, quite visible and jarringly out of place, when I'd returned from a quick trip to the inn for a pitcher of water. My name is engraved on the outside in an elaborate sweeping script: *Miss Suraya Saab, House of Aldebaran*.

I scan the contents again. If the invitation is to be believed, it's a royal summons to appear at court as a potential bride for the crown prince. As in His Royal Highness, Prince Javed, the richest, most eligible bachelor in the entire kingdom. An invitation sent to *me*: barkeep, bladesmith, and most definitely *not* future queen material.

I let out a snort of disbelief. It must be a mistake.

Or worse, a joke.

An expensive and outrageous joke, but one all the same. The puzzle pieces fall into place. If I weren't inured to the ways of spiteful women, I'd bet this entire forge that the royal seal emblazoned on the summons was real; but knowing what I do, this steaming pile of horseshit has the stamp of Simin all over it.

Muttering a slew of curses upon my nemesis's head, I crumple and toss the presumably fake invitation to the ground and turn my focus on the dagger I'd been working on before this nonsense prank appeared to ruin my day.

Don't let her win. You have better things to do.

Pushing Simin to the back of my mind, I draw the cooled blade from the barrel of sand and nod with satisfaction. The metal gleams faintly with an opalescent color from the shard of jādū I'd carefully smelted into the steel. The magical properties of the crystal will allow the blade to cut through anything, from armor to bone. It's practically indestructible.

And completely illegal.

Jādū shards are the only remaining slivers of magic in the kingdom. Every precious ounce is mined and measured, and can only be handled by crown-approved craftsmen or the king's imperial runecasters. I'd haggled for the tiny sliver, paying an exorbitant ten gold pieces to a crooked trader passing through Coban a year ago—literally my *entire* meager life savings and practically the cost of a house. I couldn't let the opportunity pass, even if the consequences of being caught are dire. Magic thieves are gruesomely executed. I don't want my skull on a pike and magicked to never rot by the king's runemasters, thank you very much.

No one will find out. Stop obsessing about it.

Still, I feel a nervous twinge in my gut. While my self-taught forging skills are in some demand, my on-again, off-again employer, Va-

sha, a powerful lord in the House of Aldebaran from the neighboring city, will toss me to the wolves at the first hint of trouble. He is officially employed by the crown to work with regulated *jādū* in his forge. I am not.

Vasha had discovered my talent quite by accident during a visit to my family's inn. The inn sat next door to my workshop, and when one of the patrons mentioned I was a bladesmith, he'd asked to see it. To my dismay, some of the runic symbols for fire and ice I'd been experimenting with had been carelessly visible on discarded bits of steel that littered the floor. It was dangerous for any commoner to be caught playing about with runes—especially caught by a *lord*. I'd felt the sweat hot on my spine as my mind raced for some explanation.

Vasha had narrowed his eyes. "Have you ever worked with *jādū* before?" he'd asked.

My dread had spiked, wondering if he was after a confession. "No. That's against the law."

"Not if you have a permit from the king, which I do." Vasha had pocketed one of the fragments with my symbols, his expression unreadable. "Come visit me next week in Veniar and let's see what you can do."

It had been an order, not a request, especially considering he'd taken a piece of steel as leverage. But as it turns out, the *jādū* shards sing to me in a singular way that'd had old Vasha salivating, and ever since, his forge has farmed out extra work to me. However, he's not stupid. The crystals are carefully weighed, and the messengers he sends measure every ounce when they leave.

Good thing I paid for the meager piece I'm using, even if I am under no illusions that that trader might have stolen it to begin with. Sliding on a pair of protective goggles, I place the cooled dagger carefully into the forge to start the slow reheating process. Forging takes patience and care, and I don't want to ruin my hard work by not pay-

ing attention at this stage. But my gaze keeps returning to the lump of balled parchment a few feet away.

A tight, secret longing rises in my chest. I'd give anything to visit the capital city. My eyes flick to the painted landscape mounted on the far wall of the workshop. Set against a lush purple-and-green backdrop, the Kaldarian palace shimmers like a gleaming pearl at the center of the far-reaching citadel, its scalloped turrets glistening. The image never fails to steal my breath away.

When Mama was alive, we used to imagine fantastical adventures inside the palace walls. One day, we'd both be ladies-in-waiting, and the next, fierce palace guards defending the lives of its occupants to our last breaths. Other times, we'd bring in mythical creatures, like magical simurghs to fight with us against the forces of darkness. I let out a soft snort; she used to call me her little firebird. Her imagination had always been better than mine.

Even on her deathbed, she'd called me that.

"Come on, little firebird," she'd wheezed. "I don't look *that* bad."

She'd looked worse than bad—gaunt and sallow as if something cursed was feeding off her very soul, a wasting illness we'd never seen the likes of. In a matter of months, she'd entirely diminished. "You're beautiful, Mama," I'd said brightly, sitting beside her and taking care not to jostle her too much. It might have been childish, but I'd wanted to hold on to her in any way I could. "What shall we pretend to be today? Spies? Princesses?"

But her expression had gone vacant. "There's a room in the southernmost turret, and you can see for miles through its window. Even the entire hedge maze." I'd gaped at her, but she'd looked past me, to someplace I couldn't reach. "My friend Nihira lived there. She was an artist, too. That painting was a gift from her . . ." Her words had trailed away as exhaustion took root, and after that, she'd deteriorated much too quickly for stories.

To this day, I can't look at the painting—or that turret and the

green maze—without thinking of her, without wanting to see the world through her eyes just once. I'm nearly twenty-five and I've never even been to the realm's capital city. Never been *anywhere*.

I stare past the tiny window to the sun-scorched desert beyond the village spreading for endless miles. It's one of the poorest areas of the kingdom, nothing like Kaldari, but Coban has beauty, too. Right now, the morning sun stretches high over the horizon, spearing its brilliant golden fingers across the sands in a way that's familiar and new all at once. The light is never the same. One day, it turns the desert molten silver, and the next, it's undulating in tones of firestorm red. I smile—the desert and Coban will always be my home, no matter my secret wishes to disappear into that Kaldarian painting.

"Dreaming about the day you become a princess of Oryndhr again?" Laleh's laughing voice makes me whip around, a flush creeping into my cheeks as she pulls the forge door shut against a gust of dry air. "Why is it hot as balls in here? Worse than the pits of Droon, I swear."

I roll my eyes at my oldest friend. It's sweltering, but nowhere can be as hot as Droon. The abandoned city is made up mostly of molten lava, thanks to a very active volcano. "I'm working on getting this dagger done."

"How's that going?" she asks, floating into the workshop on the cloud of her jewel-green skirts.

"I finished the pommel—a simurgh in honor of Mama. It's over there on the bench." I watch as she examines the carved hilt, the head of the simurgh curving at the end and the wings making up the two decorative quillons.

"It's beautiful," Laleh says. "She would have loved it."

My heart squeezes. "Thank you. Nice outfit, by the way."

"Green is definitely my color." She twirls for my inspection. Emerald silk attached to twin gold armbands floats around her, complementing her cropped black hair that has been brazenly combed into dyed green points. Laleh's various quirky looks have evolved over the

years, but they never get dull. I love that about her.

“Every color is your color,” I say over my shoulder. “Also, I’d much prefer to be a spy than a princess.”

She lifts a brow. “You say that as though a princess can’t be a badass. Nothing wrong with being beautiful, powerful, *and* capable. You could be a princess spy.”

I carefully adjust the now orange-hued blade in the kiln to make sure it heats evenly. I trust Laleh with my life; she’s the only one who knows about my unlawful *jādū* purchase, so no need to hide what I’m doing. “I don’t know. All the royals in Kaldari seem to be indolent, spoiled, and selfish. Upheaval is on their doorstep, their people are starving from the Dahaka blockades, and what do they do? Have parties. I wouldn’t be a Kaldarian princess if you paid me.”

“Tell me how you really feel.” She wrinkles her nose with a grimace. “Why are you so obsessed with the Dahaka anyway? It’s not as though those rebels are going to touch us *here*. Leave the politics to the aldermen and the ruling houses, I say.”

“The houses are divided and their bickering won’t save us,” I explain, frowning at her casual dismissal of the Dahaka, the brutal rebel militia that has grown more powerful—and more violent—in recent years. While I have no love for the crown, the rebels and their bloodshed don’t seem like an alternative to embrace. And everyone knows that with no leadership at all, the only people who will suffer are the least powerful. Namely us. “Some say that House Regulus and House Antares secretly support what the Dahaka are doing.”

Laleh waves a manicured hand. “What’s new? The houses never agree on anything.”

She’s not wrong, but the tension feels different this time. It’s volatile. Most of the locals in Coban pay tithes to the House of Aldebaran. Though the largest, it’s the poorest house by far, made up of farmers, builders, craftsmen, and traders.

My Elonian-born mother had been part of the House of Fomal-

haut, the creators, the philosophers, and the artists. Fomalhaut is also notorious for harboring arcanists and heretics, though most of those have been weeded out by the Imperial House in recent decades. Papa had been part of the House of Regulus, the richest of the houses, comprising innovators, inventors, and thinkers—until he'd renounced all ties, saying they were too insular. It wasn't a decision he made lightly. Most who don't align with a house are outliers and criminals—or worse, they are Scavs, the dangerous nomadic outlaws who call the Dustlands home.

Rumors abound that the leader of the Dahaka is from the House of Antares. That wouldn't surprise me one bit—they're obsessed with war and strength.

I shake my head. "I'll bet my right arm that the Dahaka are a front, some kind of underhanded power grab by either Regulus or Antares," I say. "They might claim to be anti-monarchy and egalitarian, but if they destabilize the crown, we're just exchanging one tyrant for another."

Laleh groans. "Seriously, though, who wants to read about rebel attacks on jādū mines and which house has the biggest cock? It's depressing."

I can't help but laugh at her irreverent comparison. Sometimes it does seem like a cock-measuring contest with the four houses. Pulling my protective goggles back over my eyes, I check the now red-hot blade and remove the dagger carefully from the forge, burying it in the nearby barrel of sand.

"I like to stay abreast of what's happening in the kingdom. I want to be informed. There's nothing wrong with that."

"Blah, blah, and more blah." She sighs dramatically, batting her eyes and drawing one of the silks from her armband across the lower half of her face in a playful move. "But speaking of the monarchy . . . just for a minute, can we talk about my fantasy about moving to Kaldari, living in the palace, and seducing a sexy-as-sin prince so

that I can ride him right into his gold-threaded cushions?"

I nearly choke on my spit, though I should be used to Laleh's shocking tongue. Unlike me, it's no secret that she's had many lovers. Wiping my hands on my leather apron, I remove my goggles and prop a hip on my workbench. "Prince Javed?"

She lets out a lusty moan. "Yes! Ashes below, I'd let him do unspeakable things to me."

"Aren't you seeing that Jaxxian girl?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "We ended it, so it's perfect timing."

"You know what they say about the crown prince, right? That he's a womanizer with an ego the size of the desert." I shake my head.

Laleh gives a shrug. "So what if he likes sex? So do I. Besides, he's got stacks of money, he's royalty, and he's hot."

"All the building blocks of a great relationship," I mutter with a snort.

Laleh flops onto a narrow day bed perched in the corner and props herself on one elbow. "Not like I'll ever know. Seems like the royal family is on the hunt for a wife for him."

"And that concerns us how?" I murmur, wondering absently if the dagger needs another round of hardening. I draw it out an inch from the sand and study the swirling milky opal hues in the metal.

Laleh exhales with an obnoxious groan, letting me know I've obviously missed something of vital importance. "Hello, the crown prince of Oryndhr is planning to choose a bride, and he's looking among all the houses, even common-born. I'm pretty sure that concerns anyone who is unmarried and breathing. Maybe even a few married ones."

An unexpected spark from the forge sends hot ember dust onto my unprotected hands and I yelp. "Flaming sands, that hurt!"

My best friend offers zero sympathy. "The king and the queen will choose a hundred women to present to the prince."

"How exactly are they choosing these women?" I blow on my

stinging wrist and dab the skin with some cooling ointment from the jar I keep handy. "At random?"

"No, silly. Obviously, the prince has a type."

"Which means some stunning specimen with melon-sized breasts and a brain the size of a walnut."

She giggles. "Joke all you want, but supposedly special invitations went out weeks ago. Like real, expensive paper invitations! Black and gold. Ask around, if you don't believe me."

The floor tilts beneath my feet, and I can't hear anything beyond the sudden high-pitched buzzing in my ears. My eyes fall to the crumpled black ball lying in the corner, my stomach winding into hard little knots.

I moisten dry lips. "What *what* kind of invitations?"

"*Fancy* ones," she repeats in an exasperated tone. "Seriously, Sura, haven't you been listening to a word I've been saying?" She stares at me as I bend to scoop up the discarded parchment with numb fingers. "What's the matter? You've gone all green."

"Fancy like this?" I hold up the parchment in trembling hands and watch her eyes go comically wide as they settle on the royal signet.

"Is that—? When? *How?*" she stammers, before screaming so loudly she makes my ears ring. "You sly wench, why didn't you tell me? How is it that the supposed best friend is the last to know anything?"

"I only received it before you got here," I reply faintly, my fingers tracing the cracked wax seal and the elegant, embossed script of my name.

Holy mother of sandstorms, it's not a trick?

"Are you sure this isn't a joke? Simin up to her games again?"

"No!" Laleh says with a scowl on my behalf. "Fatima and Parvi received invitations, too." She grins, the scowl fading as quickly as it'd come. "You're going to love this—I heard that Simin is claiming hers has been lost, and her father sent messengers to the palace, convinced that his precious jewel has been overlooked." No stranger herself to

Simin's mean streak, either, Laleh chortles. "I can't wait to tell her that you were chosen. She deserves to be knocked down a peg or forty."

Squashing my own petty joy at the thought of Simin getting a much-needed comeuppance, I consider the other Cobanite women who received invitations. Fatima, a strong, fierce brunette, is the granddaughter of one of the House of Antares's aldermen. Parvi is our local beauty, with dark auburn hair, jewel-bright eyes, and a face all the local men drool over. It's no surprise they were selected. But I'm hardly in the same sphere.

"Why me, though?" I blurt out.

"Why *not* you?"

I shrug, unable to come up with an answer that makes any kind of sense. Alliances, money, beauty, and house affiliation have always been the cornerstones of female worth in Oryndhr. The royal family would *never* voluntarily pick someone like me to marry the crown prince. I have zero connections and no dowry to offer. My features are too bold to be pretty like Parvi's; my body is not as strong as an ox like Fatima's, although I enjoy my aunt's cooking way too much to claim otherwise. My brain is arguably bigger than a walnut, and my breasts, well, the melon gods were clearly having an off day when it came to me.

"It's a mistake. It has to be."

"Stop selling yourself short, Sura," Laleh insists. "That's your name on the invitation. Out of thousands of girls, you were invited. Not Simin, not me. You."

I chew on my lip. She's right; it *is* my name, but it still doesn't make sense. I'm a nobody. My gaze slides back to the dagger. I'm a nobody, and technically, I'm a lawbreaker. I should be *avoiding* the crown's notice instead of soliciting it. My stomach roils and tumbles . . . but I can't decide if it's from excitement or from something a little more sinister, like the tingle that comes before disaster strikes.

Because if something is too good to be true, it might be exactly that. A lie.